

Matthew 18: 15-20 / Romans 13: 8-14

Heavenly Father, through weak human words, give us grace to hear your true and living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

How do I follow Mike's sermon last week on busyness? Several have said to me during the week when I've suggested something to them, not all seriously, – I can't do that I'm far too busy already! I've even heard it's lead to conflict in a marriage – as suddenly the partners are refusing to do those extra things that other person desires!

But seriously – let's make sure we are dropping the less important things so we can do the most important. A phrase that I heard some years back which has stayed with me and I sometimes remember to act on is – the important thing is that the important thing is the important thing. Definitely worth remembering!

So what is the really important in our lives? Surely it's our relationships – with God and with those around us? I don't think I had appreciated just how important relationship and community are until I did the "Happiness course". There is so much joy and mutual benefit through being with people. No wonder love is what God gives and desires from us, but love has to give and receive, it can't remain isolated; it has to be demonstrated.

We've just heard from the Message - Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love. It all sounds good – but what happens when things go wrong? When there's real conflict? Do we run? Ignore? Hope it will go away? Avoid people?

Our gospel reading is both challenging and practical. At first sight, it may come across as very disciplinarian. But if we look at the rest of Matthew 18 we'd find it's a chapter all about relationships and supporting and encouraging each other. It starts with welcoming children into the kingdom, not causing them to sin and emphasises the need to humbly accept one another. Then there's the lovely parable (which the children are looking at this morning) of Jesus the shepherd searching for the lost sheep – even risking leaving behind 99 others because the 1 who was lost was so valued by him and needed to be restored. The chapter concludes by encouraging us to forgive, not once but more times than we can even count.

So when we appreciate this context we discover that today's verses are really about bringing together, forgiving, restoring, reconciling not casting out and disciplining. They provide practical guidelines about what we do when someone, particularly in our church family sins or upsets us or we feel has a grievance against us. How do we continue to demonstrate love – to make sure that the essential unity, particularly within a church is maintained?

Isn't our natural tendency when someone hurts us, or we see they are going wrong - to gossip and encourage others to take our view so that sides are created. Do you know what so and so has

done? That's awful. We can so quickly destroy a reputation. Joe Bloggs – did such and such against me – he's not much of a Christian.. And quickly we have put ourselves in the place of judging.

But I'm sure you've heard it said – when you point the finger at someone you have three fingers pointing back at yourself!

The focus of these verses is about restoration not accusation. It's definitely wrong to talk **about** someone before you talk **to** someone – apart from one exception – you can and should be talking to God about that person – seeking their blessing and praying for wisdom to identify where we may be the reason for the conflict.

If someone does something wrong, particularly if it is against you – despite the hurt it causes you, the Jesus way of responding is to go and quietly talk it through with them – just the two of you – face to face and definitely not "Facebook to Facebook" communication! Keep it personal and private!

Today there's so many ways to communicate – letters, email, texting, and if you're really mad at someone, (especially if you're the USA president) you can just Tweet it, but this is not **the Jesus way**. It's hard to communicate emotion in an email or text, even with emojis and it's so very easy to misunderstand someone else – particularly if you're like me at predicative text and accidentally select the wrong word! Fast angry electronic messages may vent our feelings or get something off our chest quickly but they do nothing for the other person and can needlessly escalate something to the whole world! If we have to use such communication there's wisdom in sleeping before pressing send!

In contrast **the Jesus way** is personal, and private and that takes courage and needs to be done with humility and gentleness realising we're no better than the other person even if we can prove we're right! We're not seeking to "cast the first stone" - but to prayerfully restore them and our relationship. And there's just that possibility, shocking though it may sound, that we have actually totally misinterpreted the situation and we're the one who needs forgiving!

Being open and honest with each other can bring a new closeness. Even in the immediate years after Jesus' life, there was conflict in the Early Church and St Paul's writes to the Christians in Galatia (6: 1-3) - Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should **restore that person gently**. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. **Carry** each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.

The focus is not on ourselves – proving our rightness but must be on restoring the other person. Talking, and even better still, praying things through, in love, humility and gentleness, achieves so much more than gossip which simply fuels friction and builds division.

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Never think that being a peace maker is the same as being passive. Being a peace maker involves **actively** bringing people together, listening and checking we have thoroughly understood before speaking wisely. Clear communication is essential. I'm sure you all know the famous Winston Church quote – jaw jaw is always better than war war.

Recently I heard two strongly opposing views from half-brothers over a family issue. Thankfully they had the courage to meet and openly discuss with each other and the situation went from impasse to resolution.

Sadly that doesn't always happen. What do we do if despite talking one to one the disagreement remains? Can we give up at that point? Broadcast it to the world?

No! **The Jesus way** is to bring two or three others into the discussion again with the emphasis on restoring the relationship and individual and maintaining the unity particularly of the body of Christ when it's Christians involved. That Biblical picture of the church being a body is so powerful as we all know how painful and ineffective it is when different parts of our body are working against the rest.

We often quote verse 20 from our gospel reading when we come to worship – especially if it's a small group – where 2 or 3 people meet in Jesus' name – Jesus himself is there. But let's consider this in terms of resolving conflict; by bringing 2 or more people into the situation we're actually are inviting Jesus in! What a difference it could make if we remember that we are his body; He unites us; we are seeking His will – which is done in heaven – and hopefully we're opening ourselves together to hear Him.

But what if the person still refuses to listen – are we now allowed to give up? **The Jesus way** is to keep persisting in seeking to restore them and only at this point do we widen it further and bring the matter before all the church.

And then only if that should fail, Jesus said we can treat the person as a tax collector and pagan – who were despised in Jesus' time. But wait a moment - we need to remember just how Jesus treated tax collectors and pagans. It was with love, welcome and acceptance! Love alone should be our motive!

I find divisions, particularly in the church, so sad. Jesus prayed and longed for its unity. He said that it's our love for one another that is what shows the reality of his message to the world around us. I wonder if there are times when we get so concerned about what is right or wrong that we let correctness overtake loving and valuing our brothers and sisters? Isn't it so easy to forget that none of us are God's finished article! How important it is for us to as St Paul encouraged – to dress ourselves in Christ – to let his mind and attitude become ours.

Father God, fill us with the Spirit of Christ – that we may live and love as Christ and do all we can to pursue peace and maintain the unity of Your body. Amen

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